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DIS
THRU : AD/ER
Chief, D/S
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Coast Guard Proposal for Controlling Merchant Vessels Entering United States Ports.

REFERENCES: (a) Copy of letter from the Secretary of the Treasury to the Secretary of State dated 28 May 1951.
(b) Letter from the Commandant of the Coast Guard to the Director of Central Intelligence dated 25 July 1951.

SUMMARY

1. The Coast Guard proposal outlined in the referenced documents whereby "the master of each vessel departing from a foreign port bound for a United States port could under certain conditions obtain at the last foreign port of call a certificate which would expedite his entry into a United States port" has been carefully reviewed. It is the conclusion of this office that the proposal, as presently outlined, is unrealistic and impractical, for the following reasons:

a. The masters' certifications sought by the proposed plan, even if obtained, would make little contribution toward effectively "controlling merchant vessels entering United States ports to insure greater national security."

b. The proposed certification measure, in any case, could be easily evaded.

c. The basic machinery for analysis of vessel movements to US ports and for advance notification to the Coast Guard already exists in the intelligence structure in Washington.

DISCUSSION

2. The principal objective of the proposed plan is apparently to prevent the "clandestine delivery of weapons inimical to the United States". This would be accomplished by two means: (a) advance certification by the master of each vessel that his ship is carrying only manifested cargo and has no cargo inimical to US security; (b) advance notice of expected arrivals, together with advance intelligence checks for adverse information on each vessel. In respect to the first of these means, it is assumed that "masters friendly to the interests of this country and sufficiently energetic" would not knowingly accept clandestine cargoes. It is patently impossible, however, for the master of any vessel, no matter how friendly and energetic, to have personal knowledge that the actual nature of each item aboard his vessel corresponds to its manifest listing. The proposed master's certification, therefore,

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if it could be obtained at all, would be purely nominal and would be of negligible value as a control measure. On the other hand, the certification would be completely meaningless in the far more likely case that cargo inimical to US security interests were delivered in the vessel and with the knowledge of a master hostile to this country, an eventuality not even considered in the referenced documents. For example, a Soviet effort to deliver and detonate atomic weapons in US ports would probably be undertaken with vessels flying non-Communist flags under the command of Communist-controlled masters, and would hardly be forestalled by the proposed certification requirement. Under these circumstances, the certificate would either be fraudulently executed or the requirement would be evaded altogether. It is not unusual and may be entirely proper for a vessel's sailing orders to be changed at sea. Consequently, the master who intended to evade the requirement might clear the last foreign port of departure with a declared destination of Halifax, for example, subsequently changing his course and sailing for Boston or New York. His unannounced arrival at a US port could be easily justified on the basis of allegedly changed orders.

5. In respect to the second proposed control measure, providing for advance notice of arrivals and intelligence checks for adverse information, the plan may have some merit. The fact that a Greek vessel enroute to a US port, for example, was known to be under charter to the USSR and to have recently been engaged in clandestine arms traffic in the Far East would be sufficient justification for special measures to be taken by US authorities as the vessel approached US waters. It should be pointed out, however, that no program short of stringent wartime measures is likely to provide genuine protection against determined enemy efforts to deliver clandestinely weapons inimical to US security interests. If it is decided, despite this limitation, that as much advance information as possible is still desired by the Coast Guard, it is believed that a plan which is more comprehensive and less cumbersome than the Coast Guard proposal can be developed on the basis of existing intelligence services. This plan is outlined in the following paragraph.

6. It is believed that the established facilities for reporting and analysis of merchant shipping intelligence now available in the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) form the nucleus upon which a plan could be based for providing the information required by the Coast Guard. ONI currently issues a daily list of Soviet and Satellite vessels in or en route to or from US ports, copies of which are regularly distributed to the Coast Guard. This list is compiled from Lloyd's merchant shipping reports and from ONI's own sources. While expansion of this coverage to include all vessels en route to the US would require a large-scale operation (it is estimated that roughly 75,000 vessels with cargo from foreign ports entered the US in 1949), ONI appears to be the most logical unit of the Government to undertake such a program if further exploration of the problem seems to justify the effort. (There is no indication in the Coast Guard correspondence that the Navy has been consulted.) The availability of Naval sources of intelligence, including sightings at sea, would supplement data reported by Lloyd's and would provide


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some coverage of vessels unexpectedly approaching US ports, such as ships sailing under changed orders. Lloyd's and ONI reports might be further supplemented by cabled reports from US consular officials who already normally visa the crew lists of foreign vessels declaring for US ports, without the necessity of attempting to secure and process the certificates proposed by the Coast Guard. In addition, it is noteworthy that ONI also maintains a list of suspicious ship personnel of all nationalities, including US, which is currently made available to the Coast Guard.

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